

Edvard Munch's Ibsenian Moods

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The type of artwork that Edvard Munch created could have only been made in the social, technological, and cultural time period that it was. His work is distinctively and uniquely Scandinavian. It is at once completely modern with its freedom of expression and at the same time it is classic in the Nordic tradition of mysticism and its idea of the duality of nature. Although the most obvious influence came from the tragic events from his own life, another less obvious influence came from the progressive world of contemporary literature. Historically, Norwegians believe the arts to be a vehicle in which to mark and celebrate their spirit of independence and individuality, Munch was no different.¹ For him literature had become a way to exercise his freedom of thought and it had also become a bountiful source of divine inspiration for his work. Of all of Scandinavian writers it was specifically the writings of Henrik Ibsen that carried the most influence over Munch's work. Not only did Munch's artistic sensibilities mature in an Ibsen-esque manner but he also began to view extremely personal traumas and experiences through the eyes of the Norwegian playwright.²

Munch's artwork was born of an odd mixture of progressive thought, stemming no doubt from this appetite for contemporary literature, and of his own inner sense of Nordic tradition. Broadly speaking, his work is a natural progression of the bohemian ideal that everyday modern life has the ability to destroy individual freedom, drain the natural human energy, and corrupt the soul.³ When one compares the work of Munch to the then current Scandinavian literature the commonalties and parallels become obvious.

The major works of Edvard Munch in the late nineteenth century centered on themes of love, death, and the anxieties associated with each of those subjects. His life's work entitled *The Frieze of Life* began to take shape in the late 1880's and early 1890's. This body of work was born out of the events in his own life viewed through the literary goggles of Modernist Berlin, where Munch spent the first years of the 1890's. With *The Frieze of Life* Munch believed that he had an obligation to illuminate the inner essences of life.⁴ In 1889 Munch recorded in his journal that "We should stop painting interiors with people reading, and women knitting. We should create living people who breathe and feel and suffer and love...".⁵ This idea of the essences of life had been touched upon before in Norwegian literature.

The new mindset that had given rise to major changes in the world had finally come to Norway in the form of literature in the mid to late nineteenth century.⁶ Many of the expatriate writers began returning to their native land from Paris and Munich with an affinity for intellectual debate and café society.⁷ Until the middle of the nineteenth century Scandinavian literature had been dominated by folkloric tales of the past.⁸ Surrounded by the comfortable complacency of bourgeoisie Kristiania these writers must have seemed compelling and exotic to the young painter in every way.

Edvard Munch, as an artist, matured in this society on the brink of a revolution. Just as there were revolutions in politics, industry, and science towards the end of the 19th century, there was a revolution in art and philosophy. Whether it was the anti-rationalist theories of Nietzsche or the psychoanalytic theories of

Freud, major breaks with traditional rational thought were gaining popularity. Running concurrently and beneath the social and technological advances was a pervading sense of angst and uncertainty among society at large. The way modern men and women viewed themselves in relationship to the world seemed to have changed overnight. In light of these new discoveries, society was forced to modify and re-evaluate its own ideals and convictions. Traditional values had lost their relevance and meaning in this brave new world.

Inspired by the progressive writings of Nietzsche, Kant, and Dostoevsky, this new generation of artists and writers were beginning to feel the pressures of modern life. In an act of revolt many people, artists and writers included, were attempting to reclaim their connection with nature and what it means to be human in a variety of ways. Prostitution, gambling, and drug use became a way for people to offset the increasingly numbing and disengaging effects of regressive modern life.

If Emile Zola was considered the leader of the Bohemian movement in continental Europe then Henrik Ibsen was most certainly Norway's resident Bohemian. He is Norway's most famous and infamous playwright. The extent to which Ibsen's work had an effect on Munch can be seen in the fact that Munch created over 400 works of art inspired by the writings of Ibsen, most of which were not commissioned but were created implicitly for his own personal pleasure.⁹ His first Ibsen inspired work was created at the age of thirteen years, with many more to come throughout his life.¹⁰ It did not take long for Munch to become completely engrossed by the writings of Ibsen and his fantasy world.¹¹

Ibsen's writings, particularly those that featured artists as characters such as *Ghosts*, were the most appealing to Munch.¹² Ibsen himself was immensely interested in art having once considered it as a possible profession. He no doubt saw a little of himself in the young painter and was impressed enough with his work to commission him to design the poster for a Paris production of his play *Peer Gynt*.¹³ Likewise, Munch more than dabbled in writing and in fact, left behind a large quantity of notes and manuscripts.

Of all of Ibsen's works it is *Ghosts* that seems to have profoundly affected Munch and forever allied his work to that of Ibsen and of all of Ibsen's characters it is Oswald Alving from *Ghosts* that Munch felt a kinship towards.¹⁴ First published in 1881, *Ghosts* was decidedly vulgar, psychological, and anti-establishment.¹⁵ In 1883 Munch reportedly witnessed his first live performance of the play in Oslo.¹⁶

In *Ghosts* Oswald Alving is a painter who has just returned home to Norway from Paris for the dedication of an orphanage in the name of his recently deceased father. While away in Europe, Oswald led a relatively active life amid bohemian and literary circles.¹⁷ With him he brings new and strange ideas that are far too progressive for the people of the town with the exception of his mother, Mrs. Alving. She, like her son, is very open to modernist views and progressive ideals. In the grand scheme of the play Mrs. Alving plays the typical Ibsen role of a female protagonist who is stifled by the oppressive weight of male-dominated society. Being the proper and pious Victorian wife has refused her the most vital of all human rights, the freedom to realize the "true self".¹⁸ It is these dead ideas of

the past, still haunting the living and guiding their futures that Ibsen refers to with the play's title.¹⁹

In the course of the three acts of the play Oswald reveals to his mother that he is suffering from a mysterious illness that he believes he had gotten from his father. This illness will eventually consume his mind and leave him in a state of insanity. He pleads for his mother's promise to administer a death-inducing drug when that time eventually comes.²⁰ The play, just like the artwork of Munch, was not warmly received by the critics with the London press referring to it as being "a revolting obscenity".²¹

The extent to which Munch was influenced by *Ghosts* is profound. Arne Eggum, director of the Munch Museum in Norway believes that Munch intentionally developed an alter ego that was largely based on the character of Oswald Alving.²² Many parallels can be drawn between the lives of the two. Munch's early years, marked by an active intellectual life centered in Berlin followed by a return to Norway, are strikingly similar to those of Oswald and his time in Europe. By Act Two of the play Oswald reveals his "inherited" illness that would soon claim his life. The powerful threat of heredity was something that both Oswald and Munch feared. Munch's fear was tuberculosis, which claimed the lives of his mother and sister and nearly claimed his own.²³ Munch also feared falling victim to the insanity that struck his father following the death of his mother.

In line 63 of the play Oswald's doctor tells him that "you've been worm eaten since birth", alluding to the "inherited" illness.²⁴ Munch's claim that "sickness, insanity, and death were the black angels that hovered over my cradle

and have since followed me throughout life” likely has its origins in this play.²⁵ Like Oswald, Munch truly believed that he was born under an unlucky star and that it was important to use caution in regard to everything in his life.

Both Oswald and Munch were misunderstood by deeply religious fathers who reportedly took pride in destroying their sons “immoral” work.²⁶ The two had very much in common. Considering Munch’s personality it is hardly surprising that he would develop this deep affinity with Ibsen’s character.²⁷ It is also not surprising when considering Munch’s decidedly expert ability in bending the truth that he twisted the facts of his life to match those of Oswald Alving and other Ibsen characters a little more closely. In 1906 Munch was given the no doubt delightful task of designing the stage set for a production of *Ghosts*.

For those familiar with *Ghosts* Munch’s painting *Inheritance* must seem eerily familiar. It was painted in 1897 and depicts a small child suffering from congenital syphilis lying in his grieving mother’s lap. This is the very same illness that Oswald was suffering from, although Ibsen and therefore Munch mistakenly believed the disease to be inheritable. There is little doubt that this painting has Ibsen’s play as its primary influence.²⁸ Munch’s belief that he had inherited a weak physiological makeup from his mother and a weak mental state from his father has been thoroughly documented in interviews and letters.

Another indication of the extent of influence *Ghosts* had on Munch is the sketch entitled *Oswald*, created by Munch in 1919. The work depicts the final scene in *Ghosts* when Mrs. Alving helplessly watches her son slip into a vegetative state. Here Munch has borrowed a theme from a painting that he held

most dear to his heart and one that he viewed as being a breakthrough in his career.

The death of Munch's sister Sophie in 1877 from tuberculosis inspired the work entitled *The Sick Child*. It is this piece that marks a major change in direction for Munch's work.²⁹ Even Munch himself believed this painting to be the cornerstone of his work to come.³⁰ Of the subject of the *Sick Child* Munch said that "it wasn't just I who sat there, it was all my loved ones" indicating that the child not only represents the passing of his sister but of his entire family.³¹ The sick child also can be seen as a symbol of the last breath of mortality for the artist himself.³² The fact that Munch used this intensely personal motif to illustrate this particular scene from the play leads one to believe that it was indeed the play that played a part in how Munch viewed the death of his sister.

In the painting entitled *The Son*, Munch plays the role of Oswald Alving. The entire theme of the painting is taken directly from Ibsen's final scene from *Ghosts*. Even the title of the piece phonetically mirrors the final lines of the play. In his last words to his mother Oswald says "Mother, give me the sun." He repeats in a dull and toneless voice, "The sun – the sun." A number of the family portraits hanging behind Munch in *The Son* made their way onto the walls of the Alving house in Munch's stage sketch for *Ghosts*.³³

A parallel can most certainly be drawn between multiple works of Munch and this final scene from *Ghosts*. More specifically, it is the action of Oswald's mother that becomes a repeated motif in Munch's work. In the final scene after realizing that her son is gone, Mrs. Alving begins tearing at her hair with both

hands and screaming. *The Dead Mother and Child* and *Ashes* both utilize this symbolic act of hysteric frustration and fright. Certainly Munch's most recognizable use of it was in 1893 with *The Scream*. This painting with its appropriately descriptive title has become a symbol for the turbulent times out of which it sprang.

Along with Oswald Alving and *Ghosts*, Munch also felt a kinship with Peer Gynt, another of Ibsen's characters. In fact his feelings for this character were strong enough to inspire him to produce many depictions of Peer Gynt utilizing his own features. In a drawing from 1913 entitled *Anitra's Dance* it is Munch we see as the older Peer Gynt dancing with the much younger Anitra.³⁴ In the play and in this work by Munch the shameless, unwashed, and unclothed Anitra is representative of the erotic temptress that no man can resist. This symbolic female figure appears and re-appears in the work of Munch time and time again. The subject matter of the *Anitra Episode*, as it is known with its abundance of animal metaphors, also alludes to Munch's coming tale of *Alpha and Omega*. The character of Omega in Munch's story of jealousy and deceit seems to be if not based on the character of Anitra then inspired by the character. More than fifteen years later Munch again lends his features to Peer in the drawing entitled *Peer Gynt and the Button Moulder*. This drawing was completed towards the end of Munch's life in 1929.

The character of Peer Gynt is largely based on Norwegian myth and folk tales of which Munch was no doubt acquainted with. His uncle, Peter Andreas Munch was Norway's national historian and a very respected authority on the subject. His six-volume *History of the Norwegian People* published in the 1850's

and early 1860's included tales of mighty warriors, giants, dark-elves, and dwarves.³⁵ Munch's father would reportedly gather his children together to read excerpts from their uncle's books and other Norwegian authors.³⁶ Considering Ibsen's interest in Scandinavian legends, this work, among other folk tales and myths, was likely an influence for him during the writing of *Peer Gynt*.

The dramatic poem spans six decades and several continents in the telling of the story of its hero. In his journey of self-discovery Peer, playing many different roles, travels from an insane asylum in Cairo to the coast of Morocco only to fully realize his "true self" in his native Norway. This profound Kierkegaardian realization comes through the "onion peel" method in which he must shed the layers or stages of his life to fully realize what lies in the center.³⁷ The answer to this modernist malaise is found with the help of the Button Moulder with his casting ladle who plays a role similar to that of Saint Peter at the Gates of Heaven.³⁸

It is worth mentioning again that Munch was picked by Ibsen to design the playbill for the Paris production of *Peer Gynt* in 1896. He no doubt felt Munch to be a kindred spirit and artistically likeminded. For those sketches Munch choose to depict two main characters of the play Solveig and Peer's Mother, Aase. These characters bear a close resemblance to those of *Sphinx*, *Woman in Three Stages* and other works by Munch including *Mother and Daughter* from 1897.³⁹ Most art critics and art historians have interpreted Munch's work of this type as being representative of a woman's place in the cyclical process of life.⁴⁰ The title *Sphinx*, *Woman in Three Stages* does indeed foster that type of interpretation. Perhaps these stages should not be seen as just differing phases in one woman's life but

as differing aspects of the human/female psyche.⁴¹ A whole other area of interpretation is gained by broadening the approach to this work and others like it. Discarding the concept of time and its passing allows a very important and often overlooked connection between the work of Munch and the writings of Ibsen to be made.

The idea of categorizing different types of women into two-dimensional representations, which both artists do, was becoming a popular theme for male writers in the mid to late nineteenth century. It was at this time that women's rights were becoming an increasingly powerful force in European politics. Perhaps it was the book entitled *Women* by Lou-Andreas Salome, which hints towards the changing roles in women's lives, that influenced both Ibsen and Munch along with what was happening in society.⁴² The scale of Salome's work can be illustrated by her unchallenged influence over such notables as Rilke, Nietzsche, and Freud.

The very same concept can be found in the writings of Ibsen. His works center on the effort to awaken the individual to his or her own sense of self.⁴³ His stories typically relate the psychological stresses of a modern woman who is being placed in a difficult situation, a situation in which there is no clear moral or ethical solution. She is weighted down by women's traditional role in society. This point is made all the more profound when compared to the many "roles" available to Peer Gynt in the telling of his story. This particular character is usually counter balanced with two or more women with contrasting ideals and beliefs. These women, whose ages range from the youthful Hedda Gabler to the elderly Aase, also act as

symbols of how that woman's life might have been had she chosen a different path.

Munch's depiction of women was certainly shaped by Ibsen's style. He seems to have reworked the characters of an Ibsen drama into his own work.⁴⁴ His three female characters in *Sphinx*, *Woman in Three Stages*, the dreamer symbolically clad in white, the erotically charged temptress in the center, and the shadowy broken woman to the right all have strong ideological links to the work of Ibsen.

Bound by the constraints of the male-dominated bourgeois society the dreaming girl's future is predetermined. She is doomed to living an unfulfilling life not unlike that of Mrs. Alving. If she gives in to her inner primal sense of being, allowing her desires and emotions to assume control of her life, then she is an outcast from society, nothing more than a prostitute. If she bows to the societal norm, as she is expected to, denying the existence of any desire other than that of a nurturing mother, she is morally and ethically suspect should she want more. Her true self is compromised regardless of her decision.⁴⁵ It is this very freedom, the freedom to realize the true self, regardless or in spite of gender that is paramount in the work of both Munch and Ibsen.

With *Sphinx: Woman in Three Stages* and most of Munch's work, there is a common thread running through. It is not just concept of realizing your true self, it is *knowing* your true self and living your life according to those values and morals. The question of identity was a pressing one for Peer Gynt. His journey was not about just realizing his "true self". It was a matter of completely redefining the

concept and replacing it with your newly discovered “true self”.⁴⁶ For Peer all of this would have been impossible without the love he receives from the two women in his life. For Munch it was not necessarily the love of two women that was therapeutic but rather his memory of that love. His mother and his sister were both taken from him at an early age and he has romanticized his time spent with them. He always kept the works of art that specifically related to the deaths of his mother and sister close by throughout his life and seemed to have been comforted by their presence.

Along with the obvious connection to Greek legend and Egyptian mythology, the title of the work, *Sphinx: Woman in Three Stages*, is a subtle reference to act four scene 12 of *Peer Gynt*.⁴⁷ Here Peer encounters the Sphinx and is asked to solve the riddle of its identity. With a question similar to the one asked by the Sphinx to Oedipus, Peer is presented with the question “Who are you?” This riddle alludes to the pressing one in Apollodorus’ tale. The Sphinx is a female who asked travelers “What animal is that which in the morning goes on four feet, at noon on two, and in the evening upon three?”. If the question was not answered correctly then the traveler was eaten. Oedipus, on his way from Delphi, gave the answer: “Man”. It is at this point that the Sphinx threw herself off the Acropolis onto the rocks below, killing herself.

Peer’s reply that he has always tried to be himself has a strong connection to the question of female identity in relation to society as mentioned earlier. The women in Munch’s paintings and Ibsen’s dramas cannot truthfully give an answer like Peer because they are not given the societal freedom to be themselves. It is

this particular connection with the struggles of women in nineteenth century society that ties Munch's work to that of Ibsen. This connection also serves to highlight the distance between Munch's work and the misogynistic work of August Strindberg.

Munch's *Sphinx: Woman in Three Stages* bears the greatest similarity with Ibsen's *When We Dead Awaken*.⁴⁸ The three female characters in the play, Irene the dreamer, Maja the one who yearns for life, and the woman of sorrow do have strong ideological links to the work and life of Munch. In speaking of his *Sphinx: Woman in Three Stages*, Munch said that the women act simultaneously as "a saint, a whore, and the abandoned".⁴⁹

The fact that *When We Dead Awaken* was written several years after Munch completed *Woman in Three Stages* does not mean as some have suggested that it was Ibsen who drew upon the work of Munch for inspiration.⁵⁰ Not surprisingly the most vocal proponent of this idea was Munch himself. In an undated writing on *The Frieze of Life* Munch claims, at length, that it was his work that inspired Ibsen. While not the originator, Munch does have the distinction of being one of the first visual artists to pursue the topic extensively.⁵¹

There is no denying the fact that Edvard Munch's life was filled with events of extreme trauma and anxiety. The death of a mother and sister combined with a father's mental breakdown would have profoundly affected the outlook of even the strongest willed person. The writings of Ibsen allowed a way for the frail Munch to alleviate and lessen his feelings of isolation and abandonment. In the

characters of Peer Gynt, Oswald Alving, and others he believed that he was put face to face with his own image.

There is no doubt that Munch felt a kinship between himself and the playwright. The kinship profoundly apparent on a personal level is most certainly apparent on a professional level as well. Munch seems to have followed Ibsen's lead when it came to the general public's perception and how to capitalize on that perception.⁵² Just as *Ghosts* had been refused by most of the stages in Europe upon release, Munch's first major exhibition in Berlin was subsequently closed down and refused by the large exhibition galleries.⁵³ This led to Munch's sending the exhibit to smaller venues with, considering the controversy, an assured audience to see the now infamous artwork.⁵⁴ The fact that the exhibit was described by critics as being made up of pictures of "an Ibsenesque mood" did not anger Munch in the slightest.⁵⁵

The line of demarcation between Munch the man and Munch the artist, a persona he created that was largely based on Ibsen's characters, was blurred. Evidence of this can be found in the extreme ease of interchangeability between figures of Munch and Ibsen's characters. The writings of Ibsen in some instances if not predicted, then influenced the manner in which Munch led his life. Munch himself in describing the *The Frieze of Life* has said that it "is really about heredity as a curse a sort of Oswald atmosphere."⁵⁶ Considering Munch's progressive views this statement should not be read as including only him and the legacy of his family, but rather broadened to include the turbulence and anxiety of the society that both he and Ibsen had already inherited.

Works Cited

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⁴¹ Eggum 71.

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The Dead Mother and Child, 1894
oil and tempera on canvas 41 3/16 x 70 11/16
Munch-Museet, Oslo



Anitra's Dance, 1913
Crayon drawing 35.5 x 26 cm
Oslo Kommunes Kunstsamlinger, Oslo



Mother and Daughter, 1897
oil on canvas 135 x 163 cm
Nasjonalgalleriet, Oslo



Oswald from Ibsen's Ghosts, 1906
lithograph 39 x 50 cm
Oslo Kommunes Kunstsamlinger, Oslo



Peer Gynt and the Button Moulder, 1929/30
Watercolor and pencil 21.9 x 28.2 cm
Oslo Kommunes Kunstsamlinger, Oslo



THE SCREAM, 1893
Tempera on board 83.5 x 66 cm
Nasjonalgalleriet, Oslo



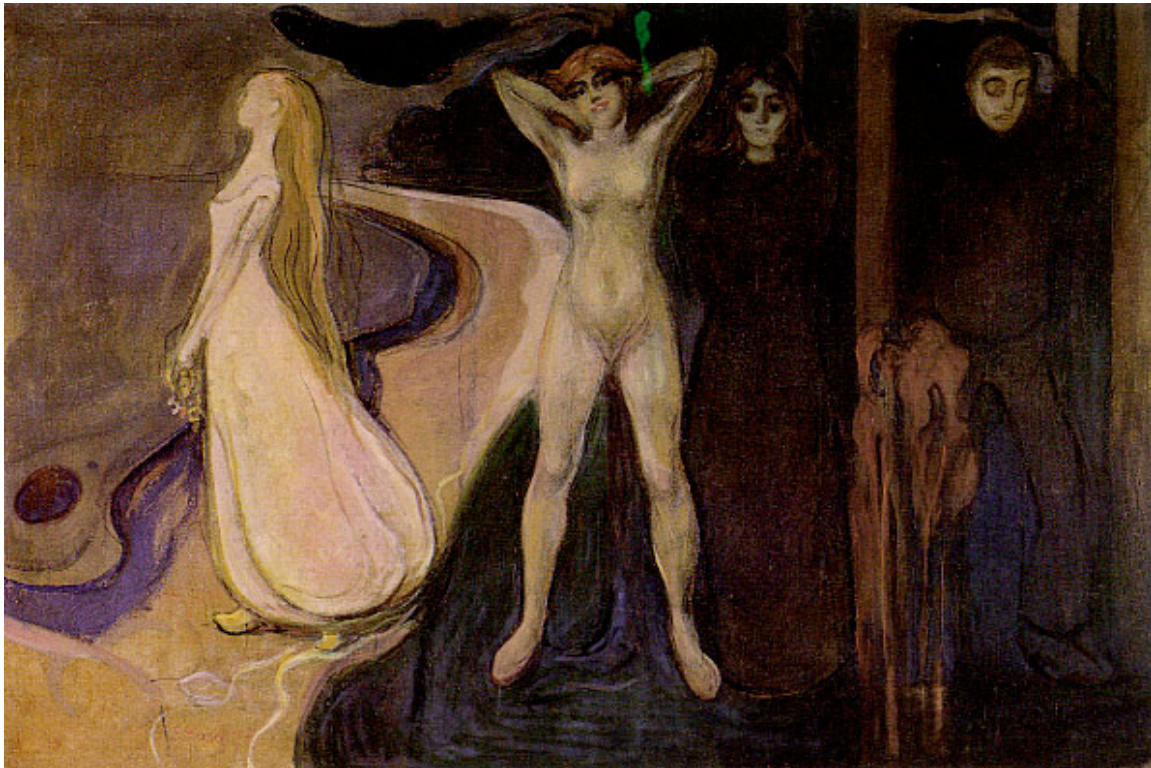
Inheritance, 1897
oil on canvas 55 9/16 x 47 1/4
Oslo Kommunes Kunstsamlinger, Oslo



Ashes, 1894
oil and tempera on canvas 120.5 x 141 cm
Nasjonalgalleriet, Oslo



The Sick Child, 1886
oil on canvas 119.5 x 118.5 cm
Nasjonalgalleriet, Oslo



Sphinx, The Three Stages of Woman, 1894
oil on canvas 164 x 250 cm
Rasmus Meyers Samlinger, Bergen



Family Scene. The Son, 1898-1903